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ABSTRACT

Secondary school students can be taught the skills of precise and complex composition by providing analysis of sentence types. While in the process of learning the formation of complex sentences, students should be given the opportunity to read more complex sentences as well. Christensen's study of modifier types (whether initial, medial, or final) can be adapted to provide a framework for the analysis of syntactic structure. Similarly, sentence-combining techniques may be helpful. Recognition of stylistic differences in written forms aids in the mastery of both writing and reading skills. Therefore, reading fluency reinforces writing fluency, although care should be exercised to supplement analysis with writing production. (KS)

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COMPOSITION TEACHER AS READING TEACHER: LINGUISTICS IS THE BRIDGE

In this paper, I should like to address myself to the teaching of the most basic level of composition, the sentence, which also turns out to be the most basic level of reading. I am obviously not addressing myself to the teaching of orthography, nor on the reading level, to the process of decoding. What I am concerned about is what happens at the level of the sentence that presents problems both for the writer and the reader.

We have all had students on whose papers we have written comments pleading for "more details" or for "more precise descriptions." What is it that leads our students to produce such sparse prose? Is it that they are not sensitive observers to the world around them? I propose that that is not the answer. The answer is that it is simply "safer"to produce a sparse sentence than a more complex one: there is less margin for error and therefore less likelihood of a negative response from the teacher. Being asked for more details is somehow safer than being told that you've done something wrong. There may be another problem operating here as well. The student simply may not know how to form a more complex sentence. This is a problem that composition teachers have long recognized and one that they have been working with for many years. What I would like to propose is that while they are teaching students the process of the formation of more complex sentences, that they take advantage of the opportunity to provide students with the techniques to read increasingly more complex sentences as well.

In order to do this, teachers will have to include in the preparation and presentation of materials, opportunities for the students to do analyses of

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increasingly complex sentences at the same time as they are learning to produce them in writing. Through the analytical techniques proposed by Christensen,[1] I believe that students could be brought to recognize and comprehend the different types of sentences that they will be exposed to in the reading that is required of them. In general, although of course there are exceptions that we could all point to, fiction writing appears to give students less difficulty than non-fiction writing as far as reading is concerned. An understanding of why this is so can be instructive for us. If we look at some of the analyses that Christensen did of these two different types of writing, we can begin to understand the reasons for this.

Christensen broke down the material that he was analyzing in terms of whether the sentences had initial, medial or final modifiers.

1. Initial: NOW, IN THE BURNING SUNNY FIELDS, WHITE WITH QUEEN ANNE'S LACE, the little field sparrow spills out his song--the most tumbled ecstatic feature of the year. (Peattie)
2. Medial: The minister, A PALE, FEEBLE-LOOKING MAN WITH WHITE HAIR AND BLOND CHIN-WHISKERS, took his seat beside the small table and placed his Bible upon it. (Cather)
3. Final: After that we rode on in silence, THE TRACES CREAKING, THE HOOFS OF THE HORSES CLUMPING STEADILY IN THE SOFT SAND, THE GRASSHOPPERS SHRILLING FROM THE FIELDS AND THE CICADAS FROM THE TREES OVERHEAD. (Teale)

As you can see from these examples, initial and medial modifiers provide more complex reading than final modifiers. The reason for this is that the reader must carry information in mind longer before the sentence or clause is resolved and this produces greater difficulty. Not surprisingly, Christensen found that in a study of nonfiction writing which consisted of 1,519 sentences, 38% had

initial modifiers, 32% had medial modifiers and 30% had final modifiers. In a contrasting sample of 1545 sentences taken from fiction writing, 26% had initial modifiers, 21% had medial modifiers, and 53% had final modifiers. To look at this data another way, nonfiction writing had initial or medial modifiers 70% of the time while fiction writing used modifiers in these positions only 47% of the time. The apparent greater ease of reading for fiction as compared to non-fiction writing can be accounted for, at least in part, by this observation. Naturally, vocabulary and conceptual load of these two genres are also of great importance. Hittleman[2] has said that readability is a moment at which time the reader's emotional, congitive and linguistic backgrounds interact with each other, the topic, and with the proposed purpose for doing the reading, and with the author's choice of semantic and syntactic structures.

As teachers of composition, we are well aware of the fact that the more processes that are involved in a syntactic structure, that is the more complex the syntax, the more difficult the writing (and the more difficult the reading). The major processes that are involved are rearrangment, addition, substitution and deletion.[3] When a rearrangment or deletion distorts our normal perception, there is additional complexity. And when a particular structure is infrequent, we have another indicator of difficulty. We must, of course, remember that difficulty in one single sentence may be cancelled by a redundant element in another sentence. Vocabulary and syntax can be greatly aided by the surrounding context.

We know that when sentences are rearranged from their normal subject-verb-object word order, the writer may have difficulties of various sorts. One obvious example is the subject-verb agreement difficulty that arises when there are prepositional phrases that intervene between the subject and verb. What

we do not so often stop to consider is that these types of sentences, with what Christensen has called medial modifiers, add complexity to the conceptual load of the reader also. The longer that a reader must carry information in mind and the more information the reader must carry before the resolution of the sentence or the clause, the still greater the difficulty.

We can look at a few more of the sentences in the corpus that Christensen provided that have medial modifiers and see how the principle operates:

Medial Modifiers

Ex. 1 The bird's eye, BRIGHT AND SILLY AS A SEQUIN, remained fixed upon him; its little bones, WRAPPED...IN A WARM PADDING OF FEATHERS, seemed swooning in his hand. (Stella Benson)

Ex. 2 His [Hemingway's] characters, EXPATRIATES FOR THE MOST PART, wander through the ruins of Babel, smattering many tongues and speaking a demotic version of their own. (Harry Levin)

In each of these sentences, the reader must wait for the joining of the subject and its verb until the author has had an opportunity to expand on the subject.

Let me hasten to say that I am not by any means advocating the teaching of only kernel sentences, that is sentences of the subject-verb-object type, without modification and without texture. What I am proposing instead is that while we are teaching the process of addition in writing that we consciously use that as a means of teaching reading to our students. We can ask students to do an analysis of a variety of types of writing, e.g. fiction, essays, or texts in other content areas such as history or social science, so that they can observe the writing techniques found in a variety of sources. This should enable them to more profitably learn to read these various forms. As they come to see that different authors prefer particular stylistic devices, they can consciously come to

realize that each author will have to be read in a specific way and that for some more than others they will have to hold concepts in mind until the writer resolves the meaning of various sentences. In practice, this generally means until the author links up the subject to its verb. Complexities added to subjects prior to verb resolution are more difficult for readers than complexities added after verbs. This is related to information overload and can be mitigated by a helpful organization of the information. Final modifiers in sentences should provide less difficulty for students than either initial or medial modifiers, with initial modifiers providing less difficulty than medial ones.

What I am suggesting is that students participate in a two-way process: the analysis of sentence types in the kinds of reading that they actually have to do in the college environment and which will not have the sterility associated with many reading exercises that although topical in content still retain their exercise-nature.

Frank Smith,[4] interested in reading as a language-processing activity, has argued that reading is an easier skill to acquire than writing because recognition is easier than reproduction. He says that it is not only easier to recognize a word than to write it, the form of a written word is more easily recognized by the reader than it is recalled by the writer. He points out that there are also a number of advantages related to the fact that the reader's direction of information-processing goes from the surface structure (the form) of the written symbol to the deep structure of meaning while the writer must work in the opposite direction. Smith believes that the reader is able to take advantage of the many forms of redundancy in language--he does not need to identify every word or even every phrase--while the writer is committed to producing them. The reader is thus able to proceed much faster than the writer

and can skip over items that he is not sure about or that he regards as relatively unimportant.

If, as Smith suggests, the writer is constrained far more rigidly than the reader to follow the line of a text, then we might ask, how useful are these processes in reinforcing each other? For the fluent reader, as reinforcing processes, they are probably less useful than for the troubled reader. No-one who is working in the field of reading today from the psycholinguistic perspective wants to slow down the processing of language for the troubled reader. In fact, just the opposite is hoped for. The reader needs to learn to extract meaning from a text by sampling the available visual material only to the point where he can extract meaning from it. But when the complexities of syntax interfere markedly with the processing of language, then a careful examination of the syntactic structures involved in the reading can be helpful. When the reader has gained familiarity with particular complex syntactical structures, they will no longer slow him down in his reading.

Support for this position is presented by Thomas J. Farrell[5] who reports on a study carried out by Dorothy Mae Menosky.[6] Menosky's study showed that one of the fallacies of the many standardized reading tests is that these tests only present short selections for the students to read. When these same students have been tested on longer selections from similar works, the students have scored higher. One of the reasons for this appears to be that the readers have learned to process the language of the particular author in a better way. This indicates that the students have gained further familiarity with the syntactical structures chosen by a particular author.

This analytic process is still a rather passive approach and appropriately enough in a composition class, it must be supplemented by much writing. One

recent approach to writing is the sentence-combining technique which has developed as an outgrowth of transformational generative grammar. For the reinforcement of reading and the activity of writing, students can be given simple kernel sentences which are easiest to read, in relative terms, and asked to combine them. Mutual reinforcement of complexity in reading and writing can then be produced simultaneously.

A sequential approach to the teaching of sentence construction using sentence-combining has been proposed by Charles Cooper.[7] In some ways, it mirrors the analytic process. The complexities involved in specific patterns of embedding are introduced gradually with the kernels provided so that students have no content difficulties. The types of embeddings are rigidly controlled with simple ones introduced first and more difficult ones presented later. For most high school and college students, the embeddings of simple adjectives and participles, adjective phrases such as prepositional phrases and appositives could be covered very rapidly. The embeddings of adjective clauses (using who, when, which, that or where) could be presented as those which frequently intervene between subject and predicate. It is with the introduction of noun clauses used as subject or object that more time must be spent working with the construction of particular forms. Just as these sentence types are the least likely ones for students to produce spontaneously in their writing, so are they the ones most likely to present difficulty in reading comprehension. And when multiple embeddings are included within a single sentence, the reading and the writing problems increase. (The interested reader will find a complete outline for writing sentence-combining problems in the Cooper article.)

As the students gain familiarity in the construction of these unfamiliar sentence-types, their new knowledge will carry over to their reading of these

sentence types. To repeat Smith's point, the recognition of these patterns becomes a much less complex process than the production of them.

A less guided approach to the construction of sentences has been suggested by William Strong in his text, Sentence-Combining.[8] He approaches the construction of more complex sentences by giving his readers series of kernel sentences to let them discover the options available to writers.

1. The writer is young.
2. The writer is developing.
3. The writer works with options.

Possible transformation (combinations) using these kernels are as follows:

A. The young, developing writer works with options.

B. The young writer who is developing works with options.

C. The writer who is young and developing works with options.

D. Options are worked with by the young, developing writer.

The point, as Strong makes it, is that even a short cluster of kernels offers several possibilities and after the student generates some of these, then he can make a choice of the one which he prefers.

More options can be added to the original strings of kernels.

4. The options are stylistic
5. The options are for insights
6. The insights are into language.

The following sentences can be generated to include all the information in kernels 1-6:

E. The young, developing writer works with stylistic options for insights into language.

F. The young, developing writer works with options of style for language insights.

G. The young, developing writer works for language insights through stylistic options.

Naturally, these different forms must allow for changes of some words such as with changed to through in pattern G. But students should be encouraged to make such changes as long as they do not interfere with the basic meaning. Students are beginning to practice the formation of more sophisticated and mature sentences, the kinds that they want to produce in their writing and read in the materials provided to them through their college experience and for their professional goals.

Through a conscious building up of the relationship between reading and writing skills, the instructor can reinforce these skills for the students by letting them consciously work from one direction to the other: from analysis in reading to production in writing. The result can leave the students with the tools for reading and the capabilities for writing. Rather than a weakening of either skill, the composition teacher who also functions as a reading teacher can end up teaching two skills for the price of one.

Footnotes

[1]Francis Christensen. Notes Toward A New Rhetoric. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

[2]Daniel R. Hittleman. "Seeking A Psycholinguistic Definition of Readability," The Reading Teacher, 26:783-89 (May 1973).

[3]John Dawkins. Syntax and Readability. (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1975).

[4]Frank Smith. Psycholinguistics and Reading. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973).

[5]Thomas J. Farrell, "Reading in the Community College," College English, 37, No. 1 (Sept. 1975), 44.

[6]Dorothy Mae Menosky. A Psycholinguistic Description of the Reading Miscues Generated During the Reading of Varying Portions of Text by Selected Readers From Grades Two, Four, Six and Eight. Diss. Wayne State U. 1971 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, Order No. 72-14,600).

[7]Charles Cooper. "An Outline for Writing Sentence-Combining Problems," English Journal, 62 (Jan. 1973).

[8]William Strong, Sentence Combining (New York: Random House, 1973).